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ABSTRACT

The findings of a qualitative study of migrant graduate students from India who now reside in the United State is presented. Through a series of interviews with students attending three U.S. universities, a model of the migratory process was developed. Much recent work on migratory theory has focused on the lack of opportunities in the students' home country ("push" factors) and the greater opportunities afforded by industrializated nations ("pull" factors). The model developed in this study argues that it is necessary to look beyond push and pull factors to cultural conditions--of both the student's home country and the "world-student" culture--as creating a field of norms and identities that shapes student actions. The relationship between the world-student culture and world-system structures is examined, with the result being a unique description of the so-called "brain drain" phenomena. A 12-item bibliography is included. (DB)

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Beyond 'Push' and 'Pull' Explanations, Asian-Indian Graduate Students in the United States

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Abstract:

Through a series of semi-structured interviews with Asian Indian graduate students attending three U.S. universities, the authors phenomonologically reconstruct key intersubjective categories through which life chances are perceived. A 'members' typology of life chances is accordingly revealed. The origins of these categories are next related to both native experiences of the interviewees ascertained through life-history material, and features of 'world-student' culture. The 'world-student' culture is an intersubjective realm shaping identity structures and aspirations which is shared amongst migrant graduate students from a variety of national origins. Finally, hypotheses on the relationship of this culture, and its specifically Indian form in the case of these informants, to world-system structures are presented. The result is a description of the so called 'brain drain' phenomena which differs from traditional models in its joint emphasis on culture and world system structure. To clarify the unique features of the model the authors refer to the implicit theories of social action found in other models of the migration process and by contrast elucidate their own, more complex, conceptualization of action.

I Introduction

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study of migrant graduate students from India who are resident in the United States. Our interest is in the process of migration itself, -- the cultural factors which conditioned the life histories of our subjects such that each chose to come to the United States for advanced study, and the relationship of these cultural factors to various global economic and political conditions within which India resides.

Much work on migration theory has proceeded with models which imply the radical separation between agency and its conditions by

on the one hand emphasizing the process of *rational choice*, and on the other hand examining the structure of opportunities towards which choices are made. According to these theories students and professionals come to the West quite simply because they find more opportunities for research and a higher standard of living in the industrialized countries. The lack of opportunities in the home country are referred to as 'push' factors and the greater opportunities afforded by industrialized nations are referred to as 'pull' factors. The implicit model linking action and social structure in such approaches is one in which the goal-rational dimension of action is over-emphasized and one where structure is conceived as an array of opportunities existing over and against the choosing human subject. This is basically a ultilitarian theory of the migration process, flawed by its narrow view of human rationality and its radical separation of human subjectivity from social conditions[2].

Other theories of migration do posit a more intimate connection between human subjectivity and society through their interest in the role played by cultural values and norms. However, one often finds either an over-emphasis on the normative nature of action in such theories or a false contrast made between rational choice and normative 'ligatures' embedded in traditional cultures which basically work to constrain choice[3]. In theories of the latter type 'modern' societies are presented as societies in which choices and options are emphasized and 'traditional' societies are presented as pre-modern cultural realms which repress goal-rational modes of action in favor of conventional modes governed by norms.

Migrants, in such theories, must break with the ligatures of their traditional societies in order to make free choices to optimize their life chances. In this view a sort of either/or situation is presented: one either acts rationally or is encumbered from doing so by a traditional culture. Once again a narrow model of human action is in use, narrow because it fails to recognize the simultaneous presence of goal-rational and normative components in all action.

Versions of conflict theory developed to explain patterns of student and professional migration also make use of a limited theory of action and its conditions. Either agency is subordinated to structure, as in Wallerstein's work, or the notion of choice is once again given emphasis, though the adverse, unequal, features of the choice structures for non-Western countries becomes the focus[4]. Many of these approaches within the conflict paradigm also refer to 'push' and 'pull' factors in explaining the migration of professionals and graduate students to the industrialized nations. 'Push' and 'pull' are either conceived of in terms of the discrepancy between life chances in the home country and life chances in industrial nations (and thus in terms which emphasize the goal-rational dimension to action), or in more structural terms such as Wallerstein's commodity chain transactions.

By contrast, our analysis of the life histories of Asian-Indians in the United States attempts to understand the emic perceptions of life chances provided by our subjects of study. Rather than taking rational choices for granted, we are interested in the cultural milieu within which life chances are perceived and

then acted upon. The culture of the professional class in India provides the material with which its young professional students shape their identities, frame the objects which they pursue, and delimit the normative orders to which their choices conform. The culture of the professional class in India, furthermore, is itself a conditioned product of India's place within the global hierarchy of nations.

The terms 'push', 'pull', 'life-chances' and 'choice' will be used in our analysis, but from an emic, rather than an etic, perspective. That is, the way in which the subjects of study themselves conceive of these terms will be analyzed. Then we consider the nature of the cultural milieu itself, its origins in the cultural interfaces between industrial and non-industrial nations. In this way we develop a model of the migration process, for the case of professional students from the lesser developed nations, which preserves a multidimensional theory of action sensitive to both cultural and economic conditions and cognizant of their relationship[5]. We attempt to go beyond the emic 'push' and 'pull' explanations of migration given by our subjects towards an understanding of *a world-student culture* as a field, or discourse, which both frames the objects towards which choices are made and delimits the norms within which students act[6].

II Method and Analysis

Twenty partial life histories have been collected through semi-structured interviews with Indian students working at the graduate level in the United States. They are partial life histories in the sense that the focus is primarily on their student

careers along with the social setting within which those careers developed. The twenty Asian Indian graduate students were chosen randomly from lists at Universities in Texas, Florida, and Pennsylvania. The only criteria for placement on the lists from which these students' names were drawn was that each individual be from India, be either engaged in graduate work or recently finished with it, and be male[7]. The resulting group of interviewees includes those professional students who have already taken their place of abode in the United States upon completing their higher studies here and those who are presently pursuing higher education. Asian-Indians from nearly all linguistic-cultural regions of India found their way into the sample.

The principal objects of analysis are thus the student career histories as narrated by the subjects of this study plus the social settings, as remembered and narrated by these students, within which career plans were made. Thus the cultural, discursive, frameworks through which these students interpret their past, present, and future will be the object of inquiry.

The analysis initially reveals the subjects' own interpretative categories and a model of the migration process is constructed from them. Within the model three themes predominate:

> 1) The cultural milieu, carried by the social class and specific families into which these students were born, which provided the values, identities, and aspirations of the students. It was this milieu which provided the material through which these students defined their 'life chances' and learned strategies for seeking them.
>
> 2) The migrants' perceptions of life chances as they emerge and change over the course of migration.

3) The migrants' perceptions of life chances once they are resident in the United States.

After our construction of the emic model our analysis moves on to relate it to features of Indian culture, as revealed through an historical exploration of schooling in India, and to the world student culture in which students currently operate[8]. It will be argued that the involuntary integration of India as a peripheral feature of the global world economic order has resulted in a distinctive culture, produced from the interaction of indigenous and world-system cultural elements, which frames the objects towards which Indian professional students direct their lives.

III A Model of the Migration Process

Analysis of the life histories collected revealed three stages in the process through which immigration to the West occurred:

Stage One: Home Experiences and the external catalytic process

Preparatory forces and agents
Perceived opportunities within home country
Perceived push factors in home country
Perceived pull factors in the receiving country

Stage Two: Migration

Stage Three: Resettlement and Psychic readjustment

In this section of the paper we will discuss each stage in turn and illustrate them with examples from a number of the interviewees.

Stage 1: Home experiences and the external catalytic process

Reports provided by these students of their experiences during their school years in the home country fairly consistently show up the same themes. All of those interviewed come from families within the prestigious and higher-income Indian professional or

business communities. They were sent to a variety of elementary and secondary schools offering a diversity of curricular and pedagogic programs but in every case these schools were expensive, selective, and narrow in the range of social classes they served. Their parents urged the serious pursuit of studies leading to a professional qualification to such an extent that alternative careers were not seriously considered. As one informant explained:

> Although my family is in business we are basically a technological family. It was understood that we would all go into technology and science. What we want to do is internalized from what our parents want us to do. Our choices are internalized. We have a pretty egalitarian attitude at home. We are free to decide what we want to do. Again, my decision was not free from what they had in mind for my career. I think my family is democratic and rational. The final decision is mine, but affected by others. My parents mentioned a number of times that since my older brother is an engineer, I should become a doctor. This happened as early as my elementary school years. (Prakash)

The decision to pursue a professional career thus began as a virtual necessity for maintaining a successful identity within the family. The individuals interviewed did mention a number of options they had before them, but these options all fell within the same basic realm: one could choose between a number of career possibilities, but the possible careers were only those professions associated with high prestige and high incomes in India. Medicine, engineering, and computing were the three general careers referred to by all the students. Becoming a professional in one of these areas was valued for the prestige this would impart and the incomes which would result.

The factors which produced these cultural values -- the prestige of the professional identity and the desire for high

incomes -- are no doubt complex and thoroughly enmeshed within the class culture of these families in India. One could trace the origins of its components at least partially to the impact of the industrial nations upon the Indian social system with the rise of new socio-economic classes playing dominant roles in India during the colonial period and the subsequent prestige accorded professionals in India's drive to modernize, itself an effect of India's place as a peripheral nation within the world-system. Western definitions of success interacted with the traditional cultures of India in the formation of this class. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully describe and historically trace the professional class culture of India but it is important to note the key elements just mentioned: the high prestige afforded the professional, the high salaries they enjoy in Indian society, and the materialistic values which link prestige to high income. The fact that medicine and engineering were repeatedly referred to as the most prestigious and highly paid of occupations is clearly related to the effort to immolate the West and 'modernize' Indian society. As described below, the elite schools attended by our informants usually originated during the colonial period -- established by missionaries or British civil servants -- and continued to be conduits for cultural elements having sources in the West.

The life histories of our subjects clearly demonstrate the impact of these cultural elements. No matter which of the many languages of India these immigrants were born into, mastery of Hindi, the lingua-franca of India's professional class, was an

early accomplishment encouraged by the parents. Madan, for example, who was born in Madras where the Tamil language is native told us that he soon lost full literacy in his mother tongue and confined all his reading to either Hindi or English:

> My mother tongue is Tamil. But I am not proficient in Tamil. I read mostly English books. I read the works of Tagore and R.K. Narayan [Indian authors] along with Richie Rich and Sad Sack! Adventure is all light stuff. I got these books from the local library exchanged books with my local friends. In college I read Chase, McLean, Bagley and Ludlum.

English was mastered by each student at an early age and much of the reading they all undertook during their early years consisted of British and American materials. The novels, films and other cultural products of the West 'sold' the industrialized nations to these students by first reinforcing materialistic values learned in the home and then promising their fulfillment abroad:

> It is the things casually mentioned in the novels that create a good impression. Then you believe that this country is prosperous. These things are flooded into the India market. You never read fiction from the Soviet Union, Poland, or China. Most fiction the kids read come from the U.K. or America. Books like Walt Disney and Richie Rich build on a child's imagination. English movies flood the country. It's a passion among the young to see English movies. Then you see these cars and the skyline. It captures you imagination. The media sells the U.K. and the U.S. as a paradise. People are crazy for certain things. (Manoj)

Thus high income and the prestige of the professional life became goals both attractive in their own right and highly desired by the family. These push and pull factors influencing the formation of career goals were almost without visible alternatives.

Next we must consider what opportunities for pursuing these goals appeared to these students. In India itself opportunities did not seem to be great. The school system is highly competitive

and success within it requires an extraordinary amount of self-discipline and effort, with the help of expensive tutors:

> When I was in the tenth grade there were about 150 students in my batch. Of these, forty students opted for science courses after the tenth, sixty students took commerce subjects, and fifty students went into arts and the humanities. Although the distribution was somewhat equal, those who go into sciences have an eye on a future career unlike those who go into non-science fields. Within science, fields other than medicine or engineering were the last choice. In India, job prospects are not good for someone with just a bachelor's degree in science. Out of nearly 25,000 students or so who graduate from grade twelve, only 2,000 manage to get into medicine and engineering. Out of the first 100, at least seventy percent of them choose medicine. It pays more. It has higher status. I did well in the final year and I wanted to go into medicine. (Unni)

These students consistently demonstrated a practical knowledge of what subjects were most prestigious and what their chances for a successful career were -- how many they were in competition with, what the examinations are like, and so on. Such considerations led to the examination of possibilities overseas.

> The set of criteria to get into post-graduate programs are basically the same as in the U.S. But there are very few good graduate programs where you really can do something. If you want to do a good graduate program, you have to get into the Indian Institute of Technology. There you have to take the Graduate Aptitude Test. There is a separate section on engineering on this test. Generally, you don't do well in most branches of engineering except in Computer Science and Electrical Engineering. If you don't pass the section on the fundamentals of engineering, they won't even grade the other section. You are straight way kicked out. If you pass both, then they put you on a list at all India level. If you fall below the cut-off point, you don't get it. (Raghu)

Thus the opportunities for advanced education in India are limited while the chances overseas are more promising. Given this opportunity structure, plus the cultural milieu within which these students developed their identities and aspirations, plus the image

of the industrial nations as portrayed in books, magazines, and films, the decision to study in America once again appears to be an almost inevitable one. In addition, getting a Western degree is considered very prestigious in the professional classes of India:

> People are crazy for certain things. For example, in a marriage situation, if you have two proposals from guys with equivalent qualifications, there are certain people who will definitely go for the one with American qualification. They do it just for prestige. (Raghu)

Stage Two: Migration

> Coming to the States was a herd instinct. A lot of my IIM friends had already gone to America. Through my friends, I had already been sold to the notions of a better life, career progression, and all kinds of material gains. (Rahman)

The successful Indian professional student has already become enculturated in certain features of what we are calling a 'world-student culture', dominated by Western values. They have learned English, familiarized themselves with Western literature, cultivated a notion of the 'good life' along Western lines. Their sense of identity within Indian society is already one referenced to the professional worlds existing outside. They have watched their older friends leave and alongside their peers they begin making preparations to leave nearly two years before the end of their undergraduate studies.

> Coming to the U.S. takes quite sometime. I started planning around the third year of my bachelor's. That's the time people generally start making plans. That's when people go to the U.S. Educational Foundation to find out about the criteria for admission. (Manoj)

Leaving to study in the United States was a romantic adventure -- an acting out of the images of the successful Indian professional they have learned. Moreover, it did not seem to be an exceptional

activity. It rather seemed 'natural', given the identity structures and cultural milieu within which these students had been socialized:

> My coming to America is a natural thing. It was what for a pure scientist in India to do. Many of my friends from IIT were already in America. (Gopal)

The practical knowledge required to actually migrate was learned from peers and professors in their undergraduate colleges. Politically, the United States and United Kingdom both assist aspiring migrants with policies which accept foreign students and distribute the requisite information through consulates in India. Standardized examinations, like the GRE, are offered overseas as well (though the U.S. recently cancelled this policy and is no longer making the GRE available in India).

Stage Three: Resettlement and psychic readjustment

> Basically, it's just a curiosity, finding out about things and not so much about further education. At least, that's the way it got started for me. In the first two years of your degree course, you do general coursework. So you don't come to know much about the course or field itself. As you move further along, you realize, for example, that in computers and electronics, India is five or ten years behind in technology-based aspects. So, if you want to do something in the field, you have to go out. That happens towards the end of the program. Before that, it is just a matter of curiosity to find out about the place or a matter of prestige to come and do higher studies in the U.S. (Raghu)

Once overseas Indian students report being somewhat, but not entirely, disillusioned. America was not the place they had expected it to be. Poverty and racism were mentioned as features of society they had not anticipated. The parochial nature of news coverage which seems to give little attention to world events from a non-American perspective came as a surprise to others.

To offset feelings of cultural alienation, the students interviewed have all tended to remain within immigrant cultural groups associated with the universities they are attending or within immigrant groups of professionals. This is partially an effort to retain cultural milieu in which the students feel most at home. Yet alongside this we find continued expressions of Westernized values for one's work identity as a professional and even for the way one spends his leisure time:

> America was not the country I had expected to find -- maybe 60% of what I had expected and 40% different. But I can live the life I want here. If I want to work, say, during the day and then go to a club in my car afterwards -- I couldn't do these things back in India. (Ramesh)

Thus the thought of going back to India becomes problematical. In many cases the decision to go back is complicated by new family ties, as well as the feeling that one would be alienated from the villages and communities into which one was born and grew up:

> During my trips to Trivandrum [Rahman's home town in Kerala] ... , I had begun to feel like a vagrant there.1 My old time friends had left the town. Trivandrum had become just another town. To me home is more a temporal reality rather than a spatial one.

The student has become so familiarized with certain features of the Western way of life that the concept of home shifts to take account of it. Home is a temporal, not a spatial, reality. In addition, the professional or academic identity built up by the student depends on conditions which can be met only in the West, as the beginning quotation in this section indicates. As Sanjiv explained:

> You see, in India we are at least twenty years behind in computer technology. The only thing we do is manufacture

> programs. And that we do a lot. In BIT we are still using an old computer that MIT gave us in the 1960s.

A number of the informants further claimed that the training in America did not well suit migrant students for the forms of social organization and authority structures typical of Indian businesses. This is a factor, they claimed, which is recognized by students and firms hiring in India alike. Raghu explained it this way:

> Certain companies in India have their own philosophy about preferring American graduates. An Indian graduated from the U.S. will have certain expectations about his job, his field, and his place within the company. Sometimes he may find himself a misfit. They would prefer someone who knows the limitations of Indian system and who studied within the Indian system -- better tempered by the Indian system so that you can adjust better. So companies do not generally want to touch an American graduate. I have heard of companies that have taken American graduates and they complain of dissatisfaction. The technological gap is so much. The bureaucratic set up in the company frustrates him.

By this time a stage of maturation in the career of being an Indian professional and migrant student has been reached. The professional identity has been set, discouraging explorations of alternative paths in life, and this identity is dependent on the West for its maintenance. Job opportunities in India are not attractive for they have relatively low pay scales and lack the technological resources necessary for pursuing work at the level for which these immigrants have been trained. Moreover, these students and professionals express a certain amount of alienation from their home culture, now that they have lived and worked within the professional and graduate student communities abroad. In a number of cases the feeling that an American degree could even serve as a disadvantage in the home job market was expressed.

Hence nearly all of the students interviewed as part of this study were either indecisive with respect to repatriation or had already decided to remain in the United States.

IV Conclusions

The migration of professional students from India to the United States must be understood as a series of choices and activities undertaken from early life through university. While the decision to migrate itself is necessarily rational and goal-oriented, it is referenced to an identity constructed long before which has been shaped by the culture of the Indian professional class. This same culture contributes to a normative order which defined migration as 'natural', 'desirable', and 'rational'. The culture of the Indian professional class is itself a product of India's position within the current global order. The materialistic values expressed by these students, their notions of a good life, prestige, and success, reveal the impact of the industrialized world on India. The Western curriculum to which these students were exposed in their elite elementary and secondary schools carried a hidden curriculum of Western consumerism, individualism and materialism. The Western nations gleamed attractively at the edge of these students' consciousness throughout their early school years, -- a romantic world beckoning from afar.

After several years of study in the United States we find the romance of the West sullied by the experience of actually living here. Yet by this time the Indian immigrant has invested too much

in his professional identity, and even much of his personal identity, in Western milieu to find the thought of a return home unproblematical. Their identities are now dependent on Western resources for their maintenance -- the technological and social resources of the Western dominated world-professional culture.

The decision to stay in the United States is of little benefit to India itself -- an example of Wallerstein's commodity chain transactions which concentrate resources in the core nations. We have examined the cultural and subjective features of this chain, the realm of values, norms and possible identities which led these students overseas. The picture is not so much one in which the rational pursuit of life chances led to the decision to immigrate but rather one in which cultural conditions of action, shaped by the involuntary integration of India as a peripheral country in the world system, virtually propelled these students abroad. Rather than a purely rational process of seeking life chances we find immigration to be one stage of trekking a life course shaped outside the volition of the actors themselves. The rational dimension to action was clearly always in operation, during the entire course of these students' lives, but it was circumscribed by a cultural field of norms and identities which shaped the objects towards which they aspired. The economic conditions of action most important to the process of migration originated in the position India holds within the world system. Within India itself, the location of these students within a particular socio-economic class, the class of India's professionals, was not only an important local economic condition which allowed these students to

attend, and succeed in, India's elite schools, but itself indicative of India's place in the global order. An India professional is largely a person who has mastered the Western-produced grammar of science and technology and the associated values of material (rather than cultural or spiritual) development. Politically the key conditions which contributed to the migration process are the policies of the receiving countries which not only actively recruit promising graduate students but allow them to remain in the country after finishing their studies if they are able to get employment.

Notes:

[1] Sarath Menon has conducted the interviews and formulated much of the analysis upon which this paper is based. Phil Carspecken has added substantial theoretical sections to the paper, has developed its analytical framework, and contributed considerably to its conclusion.

[2] See for example Siqueira 1960, and Zachariah 1962 for implicit versions of this model.

[3] Dharendorf's work is a good example of this type. The term 'ligature' is taken from his work but the concept appears in other forms as well -- as 'traditional culture' in modernization theory, for example. See Dharendorf 1979, Karadima, 1982.

[4] See Wallerstein 1984.

[5] See Carspecken 1988 for a discussion of action, its dimensions and conditions.

[6] It is not our argument that a *single* world-student culture exists, but rather that local versions of a number of key world-professional goals and norms can be found and explained through the interaction of tradition with the global order.

[7] We chose to work only with males because we reasoned that conditions drawing females from India to study in the United States could involve elements significantly different from those instrumental in male migration. With a sample of only twenty we

thought it best to focus on only one gender. A similar study done on twenty female migrant students from India would be an extremely interesting complementary study and is under consideration by the authors for the future.

[8] In this particular paper, however, we provide only a cursory analysis of the structural, or world system, factors shaping the cultural milieu which encouraged migration. We will argue for the importance of several structural features of Indian society which owe their existence and form to India's position within the global order but leave a more detailed analysis for a future paper.

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